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Style and Methodologies:
On Carroll's _Engaging the Moving Image_

Engaging the Moving Image is the third in a series of books that collects=
 Noel Carroll's film essays. The first volume, _Theorizing the Moving=
 Image_, brought together Carroll's theoretical essays on film, while the=
 second, _Interpreting the Moving Image_, assembled his film=
 interpretations. The current volume is more of a mix, uniting both=
 theoretical and interpretive essays, although the former predominate --=
 with Carroll posing theoretical questions, from what sense it makes to=
 treat film as a specific artistic medium, to how to distinguish fiction=
 from non-fiction films. The films he analyzes include Eisenstein's _The Old=
 and the New_ and Peckinpah's _The Wild Bunch_.

 Despite the prevalence of film as the artform that most of the essays=
 discuss, the one invariant between the three titles is the presence of the=
 term 'moving image' -- indicating an overarching theme of the three=
 volumes. This is Carroll's preferred terminology because he rejects the=
 claim that film is a specific artistic medium. In place of such *medium=
 essentialism* (which has been one of the central targets of his work since=
 his first book, _Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory_) Carroll=
 prefers a less restrictive view that treats film as one of a group of=
 cognate artforms that the term 'moving image' is meant to conceptualize.=
 That is, he contends that, although film has a historical priority over=
 television, video, DVDs, and computers, it has no ontological priority, no=
 claim to being an artistic medium distinct from a range of others made=
 possible by advancing technology for displaying moving images.

 The present volume is also a clear example of the type of theorizing about=
 film that Carroll himself advocates in its final chapter -- entitled=
 'Prospects for Film Theory', reprinted from _Post-Theory_, a volume that=
 Carroll edited with his former colleague at the University of Wisconsin,=
 David Bordwell. In this chapter Carroll opposes what he calls Grand Theory=
 to the form of theorizing he advocates: piecemeal theorizing. He=

characterizes his preferred mode of theoretical activity in the
Introduction to the current volume as follows:

'the kind of theorizing that I presently advocate as appropriate to the
moving image at this stage in our knowledge is piecemeal, i.e. theorizing
limited to answering, albeit by means of generalization, specific questions
about this or that aspect of the moving image rather than presenting an
overarching, unified theory of the moving image that answers every question
. . . by means of reference to a handful of foundational premises'. (xxiii)

In a way, this characterization seems a bit disingenuous to me, for it
suggests that the problem with Grand Theory is that it is not yet
appropriate for a discipline still in its infancy. In fact, I believe that
Carroll thinks that Grand Theory is simply the wrong way to go about
developing a philosophically reputable theory for any discipline. So it's
not just that film is, to borrow an idea from Thomas Kuhn, an immature
scientific discipline not yet ripe for the overarching theories put forward
by Grand Theory, but that a workable overarching theory of film (or, to be
more faithful to Carroll's terminology, the moving image) would have to be
of a different kind than that offered by the proponents of Grand Theory.

Be this as it may, Carroll's commitment to piecemeal theorizing proves to be
quite productive, for it allows him to take up, in various of the chapters
in this volume, issues that have not generally been explored by previous
theories of film. For example, one essay is entitled 'Introducing Film
Evaluation', and it does just that: it takes important first steps in
developing an account of how we evaluate films. This is a topic that
theorists of film have generally eschewed, concerned as they have been with
issues of film interpretation or of the nature of the medium as such. And
although *auteur* theorists have set up what Andrew Sarris calls
'pantheons' of great directors, they have not focused on the more general
question of how we evaluate the worth of individual films per se. Although
there is much that one might disagree with in Carroll's account, he is to
be praised for putting this issue on the agenda for film theorists. I
expect that this essay will generate considerable discussion in the years
to come.

But for this review I would like to focus on a particular chapter, and a
particular theoretical issue that Carroll raises -- if not for the first
time, then at least in a more general manner than most film theorists do.
In 'Film Form: An Argument for a Functional Theory of Style in the
Individual Film', another of Carroll's pioneering efforts to reorient the
attention of film theorists, Carroll raises the question of how one should
analyze the style of an individual film. This is an interesting question,
but one to which film theorists have not given sufficient attention.
Carroll explains why this is so. He claims that 'style' can be talked about
at three different levels of generality: general style, personal style, or
the style of an individual film. The first category can itself be divided
into four different sub-categories: universal style, period style, genre
style, and school or movement style. Each of these types of general style
have been analyzed by theorists of film. So, for example, there are
discussions of classical Hollywood style, the style of the 1930's film,
film noir as a distinctive type of film style, and the style of the French
New Wave. Carroll presents no objection to any of these accounts, nor to

accounts of personal style (such as that of Jean Renoir or Orson Welles),=
only to the tendency of film theorists to allow these conceptions of film=
style both to divert attention away from the question of how to analyze the=
style of individual films and to skew stylistic analyses of individual=
films. Carroll wants to get film theorists to notice that there is an=
aspect of film style to which they have not paid adequate attention -- that=
of individual films -- as well as to correct an inadequacy in how the style=
of particular films has generally been analyzed.

So Carroll thinks that emphasis on this theoretical issue will correct a=
tendency to see the style of any particular film as based exclusively on=
elements that it shares with other films. For example, in arguing that the=
auteur theory -- an approach to film first developed by Francois Truffaut=
and made popular in the United States by Andrew Sarris -- has had a=
pernicious influence on stylistic analyses, Carroll points out that there=
is a tendency, particularly true I think in how we teach films, to=
emphasize those stylistic aspects of a film that it shares with other films=
within a given director's *oeuvre*. So, for example, an analysis of Orson=
Welles' 1940 masterpiece, _Citizen Kane_, might place too much emphasis on=
how it embodies the style known as realism -- which features deep focus and=
temporally extended shots -- rather than on features of the film that are=
specific to it, such as Kane's being shot from below so as to make him=
appear mythic. While I'm not sure that such a tendency is as dominant as=
Carroll maintains, I do think that he has a point: in teaching films, we=
generally are so concerned to get our students to learn how to identify the=
presence of certain general stylistic features in films -- such as those=
just mentioned -- that we don't place enough emphasis on what makes a=
particular film the specific film that it is from a stylistic perspective.

Although Carroll doesn't make this point, it is ironic that we philosophers=
have participated in this generalizing tendency, especially since, for=
example, so many of the articles in the American print journal _Film and=
Philosophy_ are attempts to analyze individual films. That we should place=
additional emphasis on explaining the specific stylistic features that make=
individuals films the unique artistic works they are, seems to me both=
uncontroversial and important. So I think that Carroll has, once again,=
gotten us to pay attention to a neglected phenomenon in our theorizing and=
analysis of films, by raising the question of what constitutes the style of=
an individual film. However, I don't think that his answer to this question=
is as compelling as the question he has placed on the agenda for film=
theorists and philosophers of film. In order to answer the question of what=
constitutes the style of an individual film, Carroll identifies the style=
of a film with its form. Although this gives rise to the problem of how to=
distinguish a film's form from its content, Carroll never questions this=
identification. Instead, he proposes a *functional* account of film form.

What is that? Roughly, it amounts to this: something will count as an=
element of a film's form if it is one of a range of possibilities that the=
filmmaker has chosen to realize the point of the film. Using _Sunset=
Boulevard_ as an example, Carroll points out that Billy Wilder made various=
stylistic decisions in order to emphasize his point that Norma Desmond was=
'horrific'. Among the features Carroll mentions are: 'the use of the organ=
in Norma's mansion in a way that is reminiscent of horror films . . . the=
iconography of the seemingly deserted old house (ruins 'haunted' by Norma)=

. . . [and] the narration of the film by a dead man ('a ghost') (140).=
Although these are certainly important stylistic features of this=
particular film, they are not elements of Wilder's general style as a film =
director.

Carroll's case for his account of film form is bolstered he thinks by the=
advantages it has over what he takes to be its main alternative: a=
descriptive account of film form. Such an account claims, according to=
Carroll, that all of the relationships between elements in a film count as=
part of its form. Carroll's objection to this account is that it is so=
broad that it doesn't accord with our normal use of the term 'film form',=
in which the form of a film is distinguished from its content. Carroll's=
use of our 'ordinary concept of film form' as a criterion to use to=
criticize a proposed theory is a feature of his argument to which I will=
return later in my comments.

But now I want to emphasize that, even if Carroll's functional account is=
less broad than the descriptive account of film form, I think it is=
vulnerable to the same problem that he claimed beset the descriptive=
theory: any choice that a filmmaker makes will count as an element of film=
form, according to Carroll's functional account, so long as that choice=
contributes to the film's point. But consider a specific scene in the film,=
such as that of Norma's final, horrific descent into police custody. While=
there are many features of the scene, including the one cited by Carroll=
('Norma's final close-up, which is performed in a highly grotesque manner=
suggesting an unnatural, unearthly being slithering toward the=
camera'(140)), that are elements of its specific style as a film and, as a=
whole, contributes to the point of the film, I don't see these features as=
elements in the film's *style* but rather its *plot*. Of course, the way in=
which this story element is filmed is highly stylized, as Carroll notes,=
but the inclusion of this narrative episode is not itself an aspect of the=
film's style. The point here is that an adequate account of the style of an=
individual film needs to exclude certain elements of the film from being=
aspects of its style. I don't think that Carroll's account has done this=
adequately and so, like the descriptive account, it is too broad.

On the other hand, there are idiosyncratic elements of a film that we might=
ordinarily think of as elements in its style or form, but that Carroll's=
account would not recognize. Consider any Hitchcock film. I would argue=
that it is an element of his style as a director to always have an=
appearance in his film. Yet, on Carroll's account, for any individual film,=
Hitchcock's cameo appearance -- such as that of being a passenger on a bus=
in _North by Northwest_ -- would not count as an element of that film's=
style, since it not likely to make a contribution to establishing that=
film's point. Where does this leave us in trying to account for the style=
of an individual film? I suggest that we return to our intuitive=
understanding of a film's style. If someone asked for an intuitive account=
of the style of an individual film, I would say that its style was *how* it=
told its story. Now I think that this contains the germs of an account of=
the style of individual films, but first we need to make a few detours.

The first is to admit that we need to distinguish, at least initially,=
narrative from non-narrative films, and to begin by trying to account for=
the style of individual narrative films. Despite his advocacy of the=

'piecemeal' approach, Carroll thinks that we should develop a *general*=
account of film style, one that will apply to films as different as _Sunset=
Blvd._ and _Zorn's Lemma_. But, methodologically, I think it will pay for=
us to begin with narrative films and then see if we can extend our=
conclusions to the case of non-narrative film. Second, I want to=
distinguish between the telling of a narrative film and the told -- or, to=
use a more standard film theoretic vocabulary, between a film's narration=
and its story. When we watch a film, what we are immediately presented with=
is the telling of a story. From this telling, we have to construct the=
story: what the telling tells. As David Bordwell has emphasized, the story=
-- what is told -- is something that we construct on the basis of the=
film's telling of it.

Having made these points, I can now present my proposal: what I will call=
the *modal* account of the style of an individual film. This account is=
quite simple. It says that an element in a film will be part of its style=
so long as it is part of *how* the film tells its story. So, for example,=
the story of _The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance_ concerns how Ranse Stoddard=
(Jimmy Stewart) came to be known as 'the man who shot Liberty Valance'. In=
the film, that story is told in flashback. So the use of flashback is one=
element in this film's style, for it is part of the *how* of the story's=
telling. It is not a general feature of either the western (the genre to=
which the film belongs) nor of the director John Ford's style -- many of=
his westerns, such as _Stagecoach_ and _The Searchers_, are presented=
directly, in a linear style. As I said, I think that the modal account is=
just a clarification of our intuitive understanding of a film's style. If=
we are talking of narrative film, the story is the *what* of the film and=
the style its 'how'.

One question that immediately arises is how we are to understand the=
elements of a film that can be thought of as elements of its style -- the=
how. Here, I would say that we need to resort to a historical=
understanding of the development of film style. That is, our theory of=
general film style will present to us the *stylistic options* that were=
available to a given filmmaker in a certain historical location at a given=
moment in time. The elements of film style have to be seen as developing=
throughout the course of film history rather than as a set of fixed options=
determined by what Carroll regards as a problematic phantom, i.e. the=
nature of the medium of film as such. Individual directors can and, in=
fact, have increased the stock of options available for the styles of=
individual films. But this simply is part of the history of the medium.=
When filmmakers make their films, on the whole they choose from a set of=
stylistically available alternatives. Of course, some filmmakers are=
stylistic revolutionaries, in that they boldly go for alternatives where=
none were seen before. But such innovation is not a problem for my account.

This, then, is my counterproposal for a theory of the style of individual=
narrative films. A question that might immediately occur is whether one can=
extend this account to non-narrative films as well. I think that we can. A=
first thing to note is that my account of individual style is not limited=
to fiction films but only to narrative films. Many documentary films are=
structured as narratives, and so my account will apply to them=
unproblematically. The style of _Harlan County USA_ just is the manner in=

which the story of the strike is told.

Still, the issue of non-narrative films remains. As Carroll himself notes,= the problem here is that there seems to be nothing that corresponds to the= story of a narrative film. Still, I think we can use the account of film= style I have developed to account for the style of individual non-narrative= films, for we can make use of the general theory of style just as we did in= the case of narrative films. The style of a non-narrative film just is the= how of its 'telling'. Although there is no story, there are a variety of= stylistic options that a non-narrative filmmaker can employ in making a= film. Only when a filmmaker adopts one of a given set of options available= to him or her -- and here it is much more important to stress the= possibility of a film artist making a particular stylistic element an= option for the first time in film history -- will that element of the film= count as part of its style. Being in black and white, for instance, would= not count as a stylistic element of _Un Chien Andalou_, since there was no= other choice for Bunuel and Dali. But it would be a stylistic element of= _La Jet=E9e_, since Chris Marker could have chosen to make a color film had= he wanted to.

Before ending my comments on _Engaging the Moving Image_, I want to return= to Carroll's general account of the type of film theorizing he thinks is= appropriate -- piecemeal theorizing -- which he models on the methods of= the natural sciences. Among the advantages of this mode of theorizing, he= tells us, is that it is pragmatic and fallible. The question I want to= raise is whether Carroll's own practice fits his theoretical model. The= specific feature that I want to discuss here, although it is not the only= one that calls for further reflection, is his reliance on our use of film= terms in our ordinary linguistic practices as evidence to support his own= view. As I noted, Carroll rejects the descriptive account of film form= because it does not accord with our ordinary concept of film form, and I= have followed his example by criticizing his functionalist account for also= failing to accord with our standard usage. The question I wish to pose is= whether this reliance on ordinary concepts makes film theorizing different= to theorizing in the natural sciences. To see what I mean, consider the= general theory of relativity. One feature of this theory is that it treats= space as non-homogeneous: the spatial metric will vary depending on the= mass that is present in the immediate environment. It is not an objection= to this theory that it does not accord with our ordinary concept of space,= which treats homogeneity, as Kant argued in the Aesthetic of the _Critique= of Pure Reason_, as constitutive of the concept of space.

What should we make of this difference between the role that our ordinary= usage plays in theorizing about film and its role in our analysis of= natural scientific phenomena. That is, if, as Carroll's practice suggests,= departure from our ordinary usage marks a defect in at least some of our= theorizing about film (this is not the case with natural scientific= theories like that of general relativity), what conclusions should we draw?

To answer this question, I want to make use of an old distinction from the= literature on the philosophy of the social sciences, that between= *Verstehen* and *Erklarung*, that is, between understanding and= explanation. The intuition behind this distinction is that a natural= scientific theory provides us with an explanation of a given phenomenon or=

range of phenomena, and as such it need not accord with our ordinary understanding and linguistic usage. Although explanation is not identical with prediction, the point becomes clear if we think about scientific theories as including predictions. So long as a theory can make accurate predictions -- such as general relativity did about the precision of the perihelion of Mercury -- it doesn't matter how much it violates our common sense. What matters is its provision of more accurate predictions than rival theories.

But our theorizing about film is just not like that. After all, we are film viewers and what we ask of our accounts of film -- I hesitate to call them theories for just this reason -- is that they clarify our ordinary sense of film, help up understand what we, in some sense, already encode in our ordinary usage. Now one consequence of this view is that not all theorizing about film may share the same methodology. Cognitive psychologists will develop theories about film viewing that will explain various features of our experience of film spectatorship. But this does not mean that we can completely dispense with 'understanding-oriented' film theorizing, as Carroll's own practice makes clear. But maybe looking for uniformity in all thinking about film is itself a hold-over from the days of Grand Theory, when film theorists thought that a single theory could answer every question about film that there was to ask. In the spirit of Carroll's enterprise, I suggest that we perhaps ought to jettison yet another such assumption, namely that a single unified approach to film should be at work in all of our theorizing about film. Maybe we will just have to accept a multiplicity of methodologies for thinking about film.

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